

ELEMENT 661: STATE RAIL PLAN

01 INTRODUCTION

The State Planning Council adopted the State Rail Plan as Element 661 of the State Guide Plan on August 9, 1990. It was prepared by the Division of Planning, to update a 1985 plan that had been prepared by the Rhode Island Department of Transportation

(RIDOT) for the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA).

The purposes of the plan are (1) to improve rail freight and passenger operations whenever feasible and cost-effective and (2) to make projects eligible for FRA funding and set priorities among projects. A safe, efficient, statewide rail system is necessary to provide freight service to existing industry and areas designated for future economic development.

The plan has seven parts. Part One is an introduction, providing historical perspective and explaining the organization of the plan. Part Two describes the rail planning process. Parts Three and Four give information on Rhode Island's rail system and individual rail lines, respectively. Part Five classifies the rail lines according to federal designations. Part Six presents the program of rail projects, and Part Seven presents policies and recommendations.

02 ISSUES ADDRESSED

The basic issue in the plan is to recommend high-priority projects for rail freight funding. Accordingly, the plan examines the economic development potential of rail lines, and other criteria, as follows.

Criteria for prioritization of rail lines:

- Attainment of the state's rail planning goals and objectives
- Potential of the rail line to contribute to a positive cost/benefit ratio for the rehabilitation project
- Availability of private sector or local government resources to provide the required matching funds
- Local economic implications related to rail service continuation/abandonment
- Ranking of the rail line based on the amount of industrial-zoned land that it services
- Current usage and characteristics of the line

Criteria for prioritization of rail projects:

1. Actions to insure safe and continued operation
2. Actions to improve rail line performance
3. Actions to expand system utilization and capacity

The other major, policy-level issue addressed in the plan is the future involvement of the state in supporting rail freight service. The plan discusses trends in rail service and use in Rhode Island, the potential and need for future rail development/improvement, and recommended program directions for the state.

The plan also identifies four issues for further study:

- public involvement in rail operations (public investment based on quantitative analysis of economic impact);
- overhead clearance/dimensional restrictions;
- availability of the Shore Line for freight service, and the need for mapping of all rail facilities; and
- taxation of railroads.

03 GOALS

The plan sets forth the following goals.

GOALS AIMED AT QUALITY OF FREIGHT SERVICE Promote and encourage more frequent service

- Increase reliability of service
- Improve system efficiency to reduce shipping times Remove weight restrictions
- Remove dimensional restrictions
- Improve the long term service outlook
- Improve intermodal facilities and public delivery facilities

GOALS AIMED AT IMPROVED OPERATING ECONOMICS

- Reduce operating costs by improving track conditions
- Encourage greater yard efficiencies Improve main line efficiencies
- Increase patronage on lightly used lines Promote healthy labor relations
- Undertake regulatory reform to insure equitable treatment of all transportation modes
- Encourage equitable divisions of interline revenue Take pro-active measures to insure fair rates
- Promote equitable public support of all transportation modes

ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENTAL GOALS

- Promote energy conservation through appropriate utilization of the rail mode
- Minimize adverse environmental impacts
- Provide adequate transportation for extractive industries (present and potential)
- Preserve coal delivery capability to service power plants using this fuel
- Reduce heavy vehicle loadings on highways by promoting the use of rail service where appropriate

LONG-TERM CONTINGENCY GOALS

- Provide an equitable competitive environment for all transportation modes
- Remove disincentives from rail operators' economic development efforts
- Promote public ownership of railroad rights-of-way
- Reserve the right to replace a failed carrier on all publicly owned rail lines
- Provide public rehabilitation assistance to light density lines to avoid abandonments and preserve rail freight service
- Preserve by public ownership abandoned rights-of-way where appropriate

RAIL SAFETY GOALS

- Eliminate grade crossings wherever feasible
- Continue grade crossing improvements to improve highway/rail crossing safety margins
- Reduce pedestrian accessibility to railroad right-of-way
- Improve track and structures

PASSENGER RAIL GOALS

- Promote reliable and frequent high-speed northeast corridor passenger rail service
- Promote appropriate passenger services and effective marketing of commuter rail options
- Promote the use of new technological innovations in the provision of passenger rail service
- Provide cost competitive passenger rail service

04 RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Program of Projects

The recommended program of projects is shown in Table 661(01). In addition, the plan makes the following recommendations

B. Policy Recommendations

1. Preserve vital rail links to areas with natural or economic resources which have the potential for future expansion or development.
2. Insure the preservation of railroad right-of-way, to include state ownership interest when possible. To insure the integrity of the Washington Secondary line, an important line for both future freight and/or passenger operations, which is currently in Category 11 abandonment proceedings, the state should establish permanent easements or public interest in the entire line extending to the Rhode Island/Connecticut border with the goal of preserving it as a transportation corridor.
3. Discourage the use of rail rate surcharges and line embargoes as a method of subsidizing rail service.
4. In future rail acquisitions by the state, RIDOT should preserve the option to operate directed service or lease state-owned rail lines to a private operator as a method of preserving rail service.

5. Encourage state-operated facilities that handle bulk commodities to utilize rail service whenever possible; specifically, the state warehouse operations at Howard and solid waste transport to and from the Solid Waste Management Corporation's proposed incinerators and recycling facilities.

C. Program Recommendations

1. The Department of Economic Development (DED) and the railroads should cooperate in locating and retaining industrial rail users along marginal branch lines having development potential whenever feasible.

2. RIDOT should designate a rail coordinator within the department to coordinate and promote the efficient utilization of the state's railroad infrastructure and operations, both freight and passenger.

3. DED should consider subsidizing short-term losses incurred on marginal branch lines as it works toward locating new industry along that line.

4. The state should equalize taxation on railroad property with other limited use industrial properties to provide equitable treatment.

5. The Rhode Island Department of Administration - Division of Planning should evaluate the feasibility of instituting a gross revenue tax program for railroads similar to that in place in the state of Connecticut.

6. The state should aggressively pursue the reduction of at-grade rail/highway crossings and undertake a share in the cost of maintaining the surface improvements at existing crossings. Suspension of rail service or abandonments of rail lines will remove the rail operator's responsibility for maintaining these improvements.

7. The state should formally establish a state-funded rail assistance program modeled after the federal LRSA program which requires the demonstration of a positive cost/benefit analysis for eligible projects. This program should be administered by RIDOT based upon a detailed analysis of existing and potential freight rail service demand. The goal of this program should be the preservation of rail service to existing industry and the extension of that service to potential new customers.

D. Administrative Recommendations

1. RIDOT should be the lead agency for project-level rail planning and implementation actions. Railroad planning and coordination is a prerequisite to the safe and efficient operation of the state's railroads and as such requires the cooperation of RIDOT and the Rhode Island Public Utilities Commission, both of which have significant jurisdiction over railroad operations and facilities.

2. The Rhode Island Department of Administration - Division of Planning should continue as the agency responsible for the update and maintenance of the State Rail Plan as an element of the State Guide Plan.

3. In accordance with current state law, RIDOT should require that railroads submit annual operating summaries, to include maintenance, for each line that they operate in order to remain eligible for rail assistance programs.
4. Existing state legislation should be amended in order to allow the state at least 180 days to respond to a railroad offer to sell abandoned right-of-way or other property. The present 30-day response period defined in General Laws, Section 39-6.1-9, is clearly inadequate.
5. The General Assembly should repeal or revise existing state statutes relating to rail which are either antiquated or detrimental to efficient service.
6. If state assistance is offered to a railroad, contractual agreements should be made that guarantee acceptable levels of service performance on the line in question.

E. Transportation Improvement Program

1. Planned railroad rehabilitation projects should be included in the biennial Transportation Improvement Program.

F. Financing

1. RIDOT should evaluate the feasibility of creating a local rail assistance program funded with the proceeds of Rhode Island general obligation bonds.
2. A program of state reimbursement to cities and towns for railroad property tax abatements is not recommended, because of the absence of long-term benefits.